

The Storm King

Chapter 15: Vale Town

The chief's hall was a large longhouse near the center of the city, at the top of a hill. Artorias and Leon could see it from this distance, and never lost sight of it even after entering the city proper. They made their way directly there. There weren't many crowds in this part of the city, as most people went to the market district at this time of day.

The buildings were all made of heavy timber wood, and the streets weren't paved. The city layout was chaotic and haphazard, with no semblance of order. There were no city planners around to keep the roads and buildings orderly, unlike down south, and there were no masons or bricklayers to pave the streets. Every southerner managing to come this far north would almost always feel a sense of disappointment when arriving here.

Down south, the stories of the Valemén are all about huge hulking brutes with large axes, who worship the mountains and sky and even sometimes practice human sacrifice. If they come south, they'd steal everything that wasn't locked down, and kill everything that gave them a sideways look.

The stories never mention the state of their villages or their construction techniques, so those who come north usually do so without leaving their own preconceptions behind. When they hear of the northern city, most often called Vale Town, they imagine a town with well-ordered blocks, paved streets, magic lanterns at night, and a city guardsman on every street corner. That's what they have in the south, so why should the north be any different?

But then they see it, the fabled Vale Town, the center of the faith for sky worship, and home of the most powerful of the Valemén, and they feel abject disappointment. Crude, wooden huts are in the majority, with dirt roads, and not a single lantern in sight, magical or otherwise.

And the people are even worse! They imagine unwashed barbarians, with long beards, even longer hair, and always ready for a good fight whether man or woman. They imagine them having sex in public, human and animal sacrifices in every marketplace, large shrines dedicated to the sky covered in the harsh, angular northern script, and fights breaking out every ten feet.

What they find are relatively normal people, quietly going about their business as best they can. Not many exotic shrines, few bloody sacrifices, and even less public sex, unless they were in a brothel.

But for Leon, this place was perhaps the most inhabited and civilized place he had ever spent significant time in. The market was loud, and there were people everywhere! Leon was a quiet and reserved person, not used to the hustle and bustle of civilization, so even this backwater town was enough for him to need preparation before entering.

But whenever he was starting to feel overwhelmed, he would think about the great southern cities and the places his father had told him about, places like the great capital of the Bull Kingdom, the old city of Teira, the merchant cities of the south, the massive ore refineries in the east that would light up the entire night sky. He wanted to see it all, but if he couldn't handle this, then he never would.

Leon took a deep breath before following Artorias down the muddy streets. They were a famous pair, and there wasn't a single person who had thoughts about trying to steal from the sleigh they pulled behind them. In fact, they were given a rather wide berth as they walked towards the center of Vale Town.

As they approached the chief's longhouse, they saw the only stonework's around, with parts of the longhouse being reinforced with stone, and a large circular stone table surrounded by archways that served as the primary shrine.

Within the longhouse, the chief was simply having some fun with his friends. They were drinking, telling embellished stories of personal glory, and casually sparring. It was a grand old time—until a man quickly ran into the hall. He was one of the warriors sworn to Torfinn, the chief, and he had seen Artorias walking towards Vale Town. He then immediately ran to Torfinn to alert him.

This man went over to a large man with thick brown hair and a magnificent beard. This man's hair was so full that his face could barely be seen, but his bright grey eyes couldn't be hidden. The young warrior barely had to lower his head to whisper into Torfinn's ear, despite the chief being seated.

When the warrior had said his piece, he immediately left the longhouse; it was no place for someone as young as him. Torfinn laughed uproariously, so loud, in fact, that the jokes and stories resounding through the hall quickly ended. Everyone there wanted to know what had made the chief so happy.

Torfinn's laughter didn't last long, but his smile remained. He looked around at his most trusted companions, before saying, "The Wraith Killer and the Little Lion just strolled into town." He began to laugh again, and most of the other warriors joined him in celebration.

When Leon and Artorias walked in through the longhouse's doors and into the main hall, they found that the partying had ended. The warriors were waiting for them, and Torfinn came forward to pull Artorias into a joyful hug, which Artorias happily returned.

"It's been a while, Wraith Killer. I thought you would've come into town almost a month ago."

"That was the plan, but we got caught up in a little extra training." Artorias smiled and patted Leon on the shoulder.

Torfinn looked over at the young man, before bringing him into a hug as well. "Ahhh, Little Lion, you've broken through into the second-tier! Congratulations!" All the other warriors in the hall joined their chief by raising their mead horns in celebrating Leon's accomplishment.

"Yeahhh!"

"Well done, boy!"

"That's the way!"

Torfinn had lifted Leon completely off his feet with the hug, and when he let Leon back down, Torfinn examined him a bit closer. "By the Mountain Bones, you have an incredibly stable aura! You southerners really know how to train, don't you?"

Artorias only smiled in response, while Leon looked embarrassed and a little uncomfortable at the attention.

"Well, you're a step closer to being a great warrior, just like me! Ha ha, welcome! Welcome! I assume you're both here to trade the furs you get in that cursed Vale to the east?" Torfinn glanced at the sleigh hovering on air by the door.

Artorias nodded. "That we are, and if it's not too much trouble, we were also looking for a place to stay for a few days."

"Well then look no further! You will stay here, as my guests. I welcome you to sleep beneath my roof, eat my food, and sit by my fire. You there!" Torfinn glanced at one of the servants off to the side. "Prepare two rooms for my friends!" The young servant quickly scurried off. The longhouse wasn't large, but it was certainly big enough for Torfinn to show two guests the proper hospitality.

"Come on in, we were just regaling each other with tales of our first battles! I'm sure yours was far grander, however." Torfinn clasped Artorias' shoulder and was about to lead him further into the hall when Artorias calmly declined.

"I would, my friend, but I just came here first to greet you. You know me, I have to get these furs to the markets or they'll be on my mind all day."

"Ah, of course, of course. Well, come back here when you're done, I'll have a feast prepared tonight to celebrate the Little Lion entering the second-tier!"

Artorias and Leon then grabbed the sleigh that was left by the door and made for the markets. Torfinn watched them go with a little bit of regret but knowing that they would return put the spring back into his step. Artorias was quite famous in the Brown Bear's Vale, as he was the only known person strong enough to live out in the Forest of Black and White without being torn apart by ice wraiths, and Torfinn valued his friendship.

Artorias had met Torfinn when he had come north when Leon was barely old enough to walk. Torfinn wasn't the chief of the tribe back then, but the two had struck up a quick bond after Artorias had seen Torfinn defend a small farming village from raiders that had come from their rivals, the Red Crow Tribe. Artorias had then stayed with Torfinn for almost an entire year and watched as the man rose to become chief of the Brown Bears, then as he united the entire vale under the tribe.

Artorias' destination now was a particular tailor out in the markets. He usually sold his furs there, as he got a good price for them, but this tailor was also one of the best in the entire Vale. Most of the businesses run in the city were done in stalls out in market squares, but this tailor was well off enough to be able to afford a proper building for her craft.

When Artorias and Leon walked in dragging their sleigh, the middle-aged shopkeeper barely looked up from her work. Currently, she was sewing together some of the grass fibers the Vale was known for into a small shirt. A young boy that Artorias recognized as one of the tailor's assistants, came forward.

"Hey, Leon, why don't you wander around the market a bit?" Artorias tossed his son a small pouch of the copper coins used in the Vale. Leon deftly caught the pouch, jingled it a bit, and left the shop smiling.

The assistant was used to seeing Artorias here, so he began to go through the furs, cataloging them and preparing to give Artorias an offer. While he was busy doing that, the tailor finished up her own work, and finally came out to speak with Artorias.

"Got something special this time?"

"How did you know that?"

"You don't usually send the boy away when doing business."

The tailor was quite sharp and had been paying close attention even when appearing not to. Artorias had always kept Leon close when selling the furs, as he wanted Leon to get used to doing business with other people. As it was, he was lucky if Leon even bothered to speak to anyone on a given trip to Vale Town. As they approached anything that even slightly resembled civilization, the younger man would grow quieter and quieter, and the happy and energetic young man he was in the Forest of Black and White would give way to a silent and far more subdued person.

Artorias could sympathize, as he had even begun to feel himself closing up around other people too. Living so far away from other people has its advantages, but there are drawbacks as well.

“Indeed, I do have something a bit more today.” Coincidentally, as Artorias said this, the assistant boy found something well hidden beneath all the other furs. It was a brilliant white lion’s pelt, the skin of the very lion that Leon had killed for his ritual. “I want you to make a coat using this. Use the regular fur for the coat itself, and trim it with the mane. Oh, and I’ll also want any fur that’s left over, so don’t get any ideas about it.”

There was plenty of fur for Artorias’ purpose, so the tailor asked, “Are you sure? I can give you a good price for it.”

Artorias shrugged. “I still want the leftovers.”

The tailor went over to inspect the fur. It was truly of high quality, the mane was thick and full, while the rest of the fur was thin and soft. It was perfect for making an unobtrusive fur coat. But it seemed there was a bit of a problem when she examined it closer, as she began to frown.

“This was a Snow Lion, probably of the late-third or early-fourth tier. I might not be able to properly cut and sew it up.”

Artorias smiled when she said this. He knew exactly what she was doing, so he simply said, “I have confidence in your abilities. Don’t go getting greedy now by pretending it will be more work than it is.”

The tailor-made a small grimace at that, he had seen right through her.

“And I know that the other furs I brought with me today are worth far more than the job I just gave you, so how about let’s get around to talking money?”

The tailor glared at Artorias. She was a respected member of the community and a third-tier mage! If anyone else had spoken to her like that, she would have them thrown out. But this was the Wraith Killer, a man who possessed enough power to live in the Forest of Black and White.

She finally broke down when faced with his smug smile. She gestured to him, and they went over to the counter where the assistant had arranged the other furs and began to make their deal.